

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 405 105

PS 025 057

AUTHOR Cooper, Renatta M.
TITLE The Role of Play in the Accultural Process.
PUB DATE 96
NOTE 11p.; In: Playing for Keeps: Supporting Children's Play. Topics in Early Childhood Education, Volume 2; see PS 025 050.
PUB TYPE Information Analyses (070) -- Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120)
EDRS PRICE MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS *Acculturation; Black Culture; Blacks; Child Advocacy; Childhood Needs; *Cultural Influences; *Early Childhood Education; Hispanic American Culture; Hispanic Americans; Identification (Psychology); Mass Media Effects; Minority Groups; Parent Attitudes; *Play; Socialization; Teacher Attitudes; *Teacher Expectations of Students; Teacher Role; *Young Children
IDENTIFIERS African Americans; Identity (Psychological); Identity Formation; Majority Groups; Play Learning

ABSTRACT

Play, possibly the dominant socializing agent for children's social competence and identity development, is heavily influenced by media-defined images. It is important for media images of minority cultures to be filtered by parents' reactions and comments in order to counter prevalent negative images. Children's interaction with the media is reflected in their play; for children from minority cultures, the imitated behaviors may not be as effective as they are in the media portrayal. However, the desire for peer acceptance leads to increased imitation of media behavior. When given an assignment to observe the behavior of bicultural children and how adults assist them, students from the majority culture report that children of color fail in all-white environments or in school situations, commonly "acting out" or "getting into trouble." It is important to recognize that adults from minority groups view play differently from the dominant voices within early childhood education and may not view play as critical to learning. Cultural values may be expressed through roles exhibited in pretend play for African American and latina girls. Teachers' expectations for aggression in African-American and latino boys are often based on media images; behavior should be interpreted in light of its cultural context. Early childhood educators need to play a more active role in informing parents of the importance of play and how play is influenced by parents' choices. (KDFB)

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The Role of Play in the Accultural Process

Renatta M. Cooper.
Pacific Oaks College

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Play is perhaps the dominant active socializing agent for chil-
dren. Since the publication and acceptance of the socioemotional
developmental process described by Erik Erikson in *Childhood and
Society*, we have come to accept the role of play in preparation for
an adult social role. However, while this preparation was once fairly
limited to what children saw first hand in the world around them,
this play is now heavily influenced, some might say completely con-
trolled, by media-defined images. For children who are not of the

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dominant culture,¹ the images of themselves that they see reflected in the media help to define who they are in the larger social context. It is through the media that images of beauty and attractiveness are received in strong and forceful ways. From watching, children discover who's cool, smart, pretty, and popular. Reflections of these values are often presented in their school experience by the other children and adults in their world, who are also acting out the script.

Identity Development

There is a social competency dimension to identity development. Once children begin to interact in the social world beyond that of the family, their sense of self begins a gradual redefinition that accelerates in adolescence. It bears mentioning that with more than 50 percent of mothers of children under three employed outside the home (1990 U.S. Census), the bulk of their socialization is taking place in the world of child care and not necessarily in the world of their family and/or culture. In this context, everything needs to be done to counter the media and their impressions.

It is believed that the average white child spends 20.8 hours a week watching television, hispanic or latino children spend an average of 22.6 hours, and African-American children spend an average of 27.6 hours "plugged in" (Reddy, *Statistical record of hispanic Americans*, 1993). Latino children's viewing habits vary greatly based on whether theirs are primarily English- or Spanish-speaking families. According to a 1993 Nielsen report, 50 percent of hispanic adults speak only Spanish or mostly Spanish in the home. Since adults tend to control the television in these families, the children in the household are primarily watching programming that originates in Mexico. In addition, "Since Hispanic households generally contain a larger number of people, this increases the chance for a set to be in use, without increasing the likelihood that any single

¹ *Culture* is defined here as a shared collection of rules of behavior, symbolic forms, and traditions. *Culture* includes all the rules of behavior for appropriate behavior that are learned by people as a result of being members of the same group or community (Saville-Troike, *A guide to culture in the classroom*). *Acculturation* is defined here as the learning of the ideas, values, conventions, and behavior that characterizes a cultural group. In nondemocratic cultural contexts, this includes learning the status of your group within the dominant societal context (Cooper, 1993).

individual in the household will be watching" (Nielsen, *Television Audience*, 1993, p. 87).² This may turn out to be a bad thing for advertisers and a good thing for these children. Unless, of course, there exists a "second set" that is ceded to the children. On such a set, the children will watch programming directed at them and will be unmonitored by adults. This leads to totally unsupervised viewing, which, from an educational perspective, is the worst kind of television viewing for children. What they see must be filtered by their parents' reactions and comments if the images are to be challenged at all.

For children, interactions with the media are widely reflected in their play. Cartoon characters and familiar story lines dictate a great deal of the active imaginative play that occurs among children of all ages. The programs, movies, and videos form common bonds, common metaphors for childhood experience in the U.S. and well beyond. Children may be new and unfamiliar to each other, but in play they find common ground, and today those bonds are being formed through market-driven, product-oriented programming.

But what if who you are isn't visible on the program or in film? What if the image you see is counter to the one you see projected at home? What if a peer tells you your response is wrong—"He doesn't really talk like that!" For example, boys begin to get attention and a degree of tolerance for displaying certain verbal skills and adopt swaggers that are frequently evident in young attractive males on television programs. *They* invariably do "bad" things, get in a great deal of trouble, and charm their way out of all sorts of problems in twenty-two minutes (the actual running time of most thirty-minute programs). The consequences of their behavior? Well, they are virtually nonexistent in the TV world. No problem is ever too big to be solved, no damage is lasting, and all is forgiven at the end of the show. Real life is rarely if ever this way, especially for boys of color.

What if the behavior you observe as being so effective on television doesn't work for you in real life? School-aged children may find both parents and teachers put off by certain types of media-

²These reports have been extensively quoted in the press but are only available to the public at high expense. This figure was confirmed through personal communication with a Nielsen employee (who also supplied the citation).

defined culture, so whom do you try to please? Why, your peers, of course! At issue here is that while children, because of the common socializer of the media and other social experiences, may be reasonably sure about what to do to maintain status with their peers, they may be very unsure about how to receive positive attention from a teacher who does not share their culture or who gives cues that are inconsistent with those they receive at home. The result is the beginning of a path that in most serious cases can lead to school failure or less than optimum performance. For children who are not of the dominant culture, behavioral cues that are valued at home are often at odds with the dominant culture.

Play as a Pedagogical Tool

As an educator who trains professionals who will work with children and families in school or clinical settings, I have found it crucial to feature play prominently in the curriculum. In work with very young children or children who speak different languages, it is only through observing their play that we are given a window into their world, an opening to get a sense of their process, and a match between the child and the learning or living environment that we have created.

In the Pacific Oaks course, *The Development of Bicultural Children*,³ I routinely give the following assignment:

Bicultural Observation

You will do a series of observations on a child you perceive as being bicultural. The focus of this assignment is to assess how the child is functioning within the environment in which the observation takes place.

1. What skills do you see being utilized with success?
2. Does the child's play tell you anything about her "fit" in the environment?

³The *biculturalization process* is defined as how a child whose primary culture is anything other than European American learns to acculturate to the dominant culture while maintaining a primary cultural reference to his or her own culture of origin (Cooper, 1989).

3. In what ways does/should the classroom teacher, or other available adults, assist the child?

Do four observations on the same child. The observational periods should last at least thirty minutes. Two of the observations should take place in a class or another situation where there is an adult in charge and in close proximity. Two should be done in peer-directed situations, free play, or other types of social interaction.

When I began giving this assignment seven years ago, I was not prepared for what my students would report in their observations. It didn't matter if it was in Pasadena, Seattle, or Palo Alto—the day that students reported on this assignment, I would hear story after story of a child of color failing in an all-white environment or in a school situation. My students were generally troubled by what they observed and often reported feeling an obligation to go back and “fix” what they had observed. They saw:

- ❑ children who were never seen or heard until they were involved in a negative social interaction. In these situations, it was often generally assumed that whatever disturbance occurred was the child's fault, and any attempt at problem solving or resolution was based on this;
- ❑ children whose appropriate language and interactions were often ignored, while every negative behavior was zeroed in on.

“Acting out” was the common element in many of these interactions. “Getting into trouble” would lead to the sentiment I once heard voiced by an African-American boy named Prince, who was in first grade at the time. He told me, “I don't like school, I can't even play right there.” While these children and their behavior are quite noticeable and cry out for attention, even if for negative reasons, what about the child who “acts in”? The child who may be a relational learner and may not be getting the cues that she needs from her teacher to do well in school? The child who can't try anything new with confidence because she

doesn't think her teacher likes her? She doesn't create any problems—in fact, you'd hardly know she was there, and then one day she isn't.

Observing children at play can give a teacher an indication of how these children function under a different set of circumstances. Teachers are sometimes shocked to see how well their "problem children" function in environments with little or a different type of adult interaction. Such observations can provide valuable clues to why children who cause considerable "problems" in a classroom are nevertheless quite popular with peers.

In discussing placing play in a more prominent role in the curriculum, it is important to recognize that parents and teachers from other racial and ethnic groups view play quite differently from the NAEYC-sanctioned, progressive educators whose voices are dominant within the field of early childhood education. In an increasingly hostile nation, parents of oppressed groups are suspicious of anything that may reduce their child's competitiveness in the job market. When play is viewed as "messing around," it's hard to see its importance in the curriculum. It's also a leap of faith to trust a teacher who tells you that play is important but who can't demonstrate to you why or how it will benefit your child in the future. If you want parents to trust you as an educator, you'd better be able to demonstrate the importance of play in a convincing manner.

Convincing the skeptical is going to take strong curriculum building and planning. It will take designing play environments that enhance learning and then explaining to parents how they work. Strong observational skills are a crucial part of this. When I worked with children, many times I would stand next to a parent as we observed her child. I would often discuss what I was seeing in terms of the problem solving, motor skills, or other aspect of developmental practice. Generally speaking, parents were quite enthralled with what I described to them. I was a trained observer of young children, they were not, and initially they didn't see what I saw. However, once I shared my observations with them, they began to develop a different appreciation for the skills of play and to view play with new eyes. The net result was that they began to trust me as an educator, and they began to understand learning a lot more. Most parents' memories of their own educational experi-

ences were of school as important but boring. If you can demonstrate that learning can be fun as well as substantive, parents will be willing to accept this practice.

From an African-American perspective, ours is a culture that does not view play as something that should take place in school. Play is an amusing part of childhood, but it isn't viewed as a critical part of the learning process. Do black children learn through play differently from children of the dominant culture? Probably, given a cultural context in which different things are valued (even considering how the dominant media culture may be reflected in all children's play). It seems logical to assume that the play that takes place will somehow reflect those values. As a child, I spent a lot of time "playing school" with my younger brother and other neighborhood children. I was the teacher, and I had my students sit at "desks" while I read to or taught them something. As I look back, I definitely do not consider this to have been a playful model, but I got a lot of attention for it, all positive, especially in my efforts to make my brother sit still! Yet this was a game that reflected the values that my culture held to be important about play. It was also a game that pretty accurately reflected the coming roles that my brother and I would come to play in school.

What Are Some Cultural Values Transmitted through Play?

In African-American girls living primarily in monocultural working-class environments, verbally assertive, "bossy" behavior is often viewed in a positive light. This behavior is generally rewarded by being given the responsibilities and perks that go with being a helpful, useful member of the family and not just another kid. Such behavior is therefore considered good and a sign of intelligence. In play, this is a child who would select roles where she could be the boss or be in charge of the other children. She would be the one to set and enforce the rules.

Traditionally, this would express itself through being the teacher or the "Mommy" in play. On television, this transmits into a junior "Sapphire" figure, but with a twist. Since the adults are typically absent, the viewer gets no sense of balance about this child's role and that it fits in a certain social context. If an adult is

present, the child probably bosses her/him too, which is a misrepresentation of the true cultural model, in which the adult is always clearly in charge and the child is carrying out the adult's wishes.

There is also a "Mommy" role in a latina context that is quite different from the role in the dominant culture. Young girls are often called "Mommy" as a term of endearment. It is a term that embodies the role of the mother as nurturer and caregiver. Playing Mommy for such a child will then resolve around the nurturing, caregiving aspects of that role. This is a role that differs greatly from the one represented in the media as being the "modern American Mom" (read *white Mom*). It is also contrary to what many teachers of the dominant culture want to nurture and encourage as part of a woman's role. So who's right? Your family? Your culture? Your teacher? Or the media?

The Saturday before Halloween, as I was walking my dogs, I passed a Halloween party that was being held in my neighborhood. The children were all in costume: Snow White, Sleeping Beauty, G.I. Joe, a Pink Power Ranger, Pocahontas, even a French Maid! The play was lively, the conversations were in Spanish with a sprinkling of English words thrown in. The mothers stood nearby, their conversation in Spanish. Given the demographics of my neighborhood and my knowledge of these kids (who know my dogs and me quite well!), I would venture a guess that the oldest of the children present were born in Mexico and not in the U.S. The younger children were born in the U.S., but they live in homes where Spanish is the dominant language. They are learning English from older siblings and will be pretty bilingual by the time they go to school. I wondered what they knew of the characters that they were pretending to be and if the language or their culture makes any difference in who they imagined themselves to be? And if so, how? An interesting observation I've made is that in monocultural ethnic play, the race of characters does not matter. Anyone can be anything, since we are all brown and the characters portrayed in the media are typically white. When the play is integrated, this does not happen. White children are quick to remind children of color that you can't be "so and so" because you are not white.

My son had such an experience while getting ready for a Halloween parade at school while he was in kindergarten. A white friend told him, "You can't really be Rambo, because he's white

and you're not." Years later, when Alex told me about this, he said, "I didn't feel like going after that. I just wanted to go home. I knew that I couldn't, though." I don't think that this child meant to hurt Alex, but he did. From his point of view, I'm sure he was just interjecting reality into the situation—his reality. And his reality is reinforced on television and in the movies.

Behavioral expectations of teachers are often based on media images. An example of this is the aggressive behavior of African-American and latino boys. Anyone can see and learn that from almost any media outlet: television, music, and films. According to these sources, most African-American and latino males grow up to be criminals. So the sooner you come down on them for aggressive behavior, the better off all of society will be. But what's aggressive to the dominant culture may be looked at as "taking care of yourself" in another context. This observation clearly captures the positive roles of aggression and persistence in the socialization of latino males. It is evident in any group play situation where adults of the culture are present. When the supervising adults are not of the latino culture, the play is viewed as overly aggressive and stopped.

Two Latino boys approximately four and ten years of age are lying on the seats of the swings on their stomachs. They are swinging, dragging their feet in the sand. The younger boy looks around and keeps glancing at the older boy for approval to see if he's "doing it right." The older boy begins to rock his swing from side to side, bumping into the younger boy, who tries to bump back. He is unsuccessful in his attempt to retaliate, probably due to his size and lack of strength. The older boy begins to laugh at him and seems to be taunting him. (They are speaking in Spanish, and at a distance, so I can't make out the words.)

The younger boy gets off his swing and lies over the head of the older boy, still trying to use his weight to move the swing from side to side. He is still unsuccessful, and though he can't see him, the older boy grabs him with his hands and holds on tight. The younger boy tries to wiggle away and fall down to the sand. The older boy laughs, the younger boy looks at his hands and picks up two handfuls of sand and throws them in the face of the older boy, who then has to let go of him to wipe the sand from his eyes.

The older boy gets off the swing, wipes his eyes, grabs the younger boy, and hugs him. Both boys beam. The elder says something to him, and then speaks to the adults who have been standing close by, observing the whole thing. The older boy speaks, the adults nod and comment approvingly. I know what is being said: "Tiene cajones" or, "He's got balls."

As I watched this play, I thought of how valued it was in this context and how much trouble both boys would be in for playing this way at school. I thought of how few words were used in this situation and how false it is to pretend that all conflicts can be solved with words. It is important what you can do with your body, important to think and act fast.

This play is traditionally displayed in "good guy/bad guy" games of many types. These are games of chase and dominance, which frequently feature an older boy who is "taunting" and setting the challenges for the younger ones. These characterizations tend not to be represented in the media these days in forms that are accessible to young children. But that doesn't mean that they aren't being exposed to them through movies and videos, with some unfortunately violent overtones.

Funny, this all takes us back to the media, which have become the image makers of our dominant culture, creating images that extend beyond this country, all over the world. The role of the media in the play and acculturation of our nation's children deserves increased and continued scrutiny. Perhaps this is beginning to occur, although I am uncertain that increased federal regulation can ultimately provide us with any answers. I do believe that as early childhood educators, we need to play a more active role in informing parents on both the importance of play and how this play is influenced by the choices that they as parents make. This educating will be done one parent at a time, in a consistent fashion: this is called leadership.